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Swinburne, PROVIDENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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But then, alas, there is Hell. Adams firmly relies on the hope that God can somehow bring it about that everyone shall enjoy bliss with him. She is an unrepentant believer in the salvation of all human beings and the unreality of Hell. And one might well wish to take one's hat off to her on that score. For the scenario she envisages is agreeable. How nice to think that all of us shall end with the joy of the beatific vision. But Adams gives us no serious reason to think that all of us shall do that. And she goes against New Testament and other Christian writings in supposing that everyone shall attain a state of contentment which leaves them reconciled to what has happened to them in this life and to what they have done in it. Adams, of course, knows this very well, so I am here merely drawing attention to a way of criticizing her book of which she is certainly aware. But the criticism is pertinent. And it is pertinent from the viewpoint of philosophy of religion when it comes to the problem of evil. Could it be that justice requires that some people are simply damned? There are familiar arguments for concluding that it does. If they are cogent, however, horrendous evils cannot be defeated as Adams would like to think that they might be.

Providence and the Problem of Evil, by **Richard Swinburne**. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998. Pp. xiv, 263. $65.00 (cloth), $19.95 (paper).

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This book is the final volume in Richard Swinburne's tetralogy on philosophical topics in Christian doctrine. It was preceded by *Responsibility and Atonement* (1989), *Revelation* (1991) and *The Christian God* (1994). Before he produced the tetralogy, Swinburne had published a trilogy on philosophical theology whose members are *The Coherence of Theism* (1977), *The Existence of God* (1979) and *Faith and Reason* (1981). Judged in terms of their combination of scope and quality, these seven volumes add up, in my opinion, to the most impressive body of work produced in analytic philosophy of religion during the twentieth century.

The book has four parts. In the first, which consists of two chapters, Swinburne explains why he thinks Christians need a theodicy in order to respond adequately to the problem of evil and then briefly surveys the resources Christian tradition provides to the theodicist. As he understands it, a theodicy is "not an account of God's actual reasons for allowing a bad state to occur, but an account of his possible reasons (i.e. reasons which God has for allowing the bad state to occur, whether or not those are the ones which motivate him)" (p. 15). A theodicy thus understood is, as he observes in a footnote, akin to what other philosophers, for example, Alvin Plantinga, describe as a defense. Swinburne holds that God may allow a bad state, E, to occur just in case (a) God has the right to allow E to occur; (b) allowing E (or a state as bad or worse) to occur is the only morally permissible way in which God can bring about a logically necessary condition of a good, G; (c) God does everything else logically possible to bring about G; and (d) the expected value of allowing E, given (c), is positive. He

claims that conditions (a)–(d) are satisfied for each bad state there is in the world. The remainder of the book argues in support of this claim.

Its second part, which contains four chapters, is an inventory of the goods Swinburne thinks God might seek to bring about. In the first of these chapters, which treats the aesthetic good of beauty, he introduces the idea that each concrete thing is such that "it is good for it that it exists" (p. 51). The next chapter covers goods that involves beliefs or desires. In a chapter on the goodness of action, he discusses libertarian freedom and being of use. He believes that it is "a good thing to be of use, to help, to serve, either through freely exercising power in the right way, or through doing it naturally and spontaneously, or even by being used as the vehicle of a good purpose" (p. 101). And he goes on to say that "it is much better if the being-of-use is chosen voluntarily, but it is good even if it is not" (pp. 103-104). The concluding chapter of this part focuses on states such as worship that are, according to Swinburne, good if and only if God exists.

The book's third part is about necessary evils. In it Swinburne argues that conditions (b) and (c) are satisfied. Two chapters on moral evil are followed by two chapters on natural evil, and a fifth chapter is devoted to states such as agnosticism that are bad only if God exists. The fourth part argues that conditions (a) and (d) are satisfied. One of its chapters is about God's right to allow bad states to occur; the other concerns weighing good against bad.

In the course of his argument, Swinburne makes many controversial claims, but all of them seem to me worth the attention of philosophers who worry about the problem of evil. As I have said, this book is part of an impressive achievement; however, I do not think it is the strongest part. Its superficial weaknesses strike me as likely to be the result of carelessness, and it would surely be understandable if Swinburne had become a bit careless as he neared the end of an ambitious project that has taken more that two decades to bring to completion. But I also think it contains a deep flaw that renders its solution to the problem of evil unacceptable in its present form.

Here is an example of what I take to be carelessness. In the penultimate chapter, Swinburne introduces into his discussion a method for deciding on behalf of the incompetent, derived from biomedical ethics, that he describes as the criterion of "substituted judgement" (p. 226). Four pages later, and again four pages after that, this criterion is called "suspended judgement" (pp. 230, 234). The book's index contains an entry for substituted judgment (but not one for suspended judgment) that refers to pp. 226 and 234 but fails to refer to p. 230. It is, of course, obvious how to correct these mistakes.

However, what I take to be careless errors also infect some of Swinburne's arguments. Consider the argument contained in the following passage:

> God, however, has the right to cause us to be tempted to do those actions (which include harming others) which God has the right to allow us to do. For if it is right for *A* (parents or the state, say) to allow *B* to do some action which *B* ought not to do, it must be right for *A* to allow *B* to be tempted to do that action, for unless *B* is tempt-

> ed to do a wrong action, he will not do it, and so preventing temptation is preventing the action (p. 145).

Presumably the claim expressed by the first sentence is the argument's conclusion, and an analogue or generalization of the principle expressed by the first clause of its second sentence that applies to God is its premise. But this argument is invalid because its conclusion concerns God's right to cause temptation while its premise speaks only of a right to allow temptation. There is, of course a valid argument to this conclusion from an analogue or generalization of the principle that if it is right for *A* to allow *B* to do some action which *B* ought not to do, it is right for *A* to cause *B* to be tempted to do that action. This principle, however, is false. It is right for parents to allow children above a certain age to drink to excess, though the children ought not to do so, but it is not right for the parents to cause those children to be tempted to drink to excess. Either way, the argument is unsound. Nor is it clear how to avoid this error without leaving the conclusion Swinburne wants to reach unsupported by argument.

Let me now turn to the deep flaw to which I alluded earlier. Speaking of God's right to allow humans and other animals to suffer, Swinburne asserts that "God does have the right so long as the package of life is overall a good one for each of us" (p. 235). Ignore nonhuman animals for a moment. God may allow humans to suffer provided they have lives that, on the whole, are good for them, that is, lives in which the good outweighs the bad. Following mainstream Christian tradition, Swinburne assumes that humans have an afterlife in which God can compensate them for bad states they endure in earthly life. But he also thinks we are apt to underestimate goods in earthly life that weigh against such bad states as suffering. As we have seen, he holds that existence itself is good for us, and, what is more, he claims that being of use is good for us. It is important to be clear about the force of this claim. It is not merely that it is good that people who suffer are of use, and it is not just that it is good for others who benefit that they are of use. Rather Swinburne's view is that it is good for those who suffer that they are of use. He says: "All the ways in which the suffering of *A* is beneficial for *B* are also beneficial for *A*—because *A* is privileged to be of use" (p. 241).

Swinburne has the courage to acknowledge some of the consequences of this view. In a discussion of the eighteenth-century slave trade, he tells us that what happened to suffering slaves was good for them because, for example, it provided opportunities for plantation owners to make free choices about whether to buy slaves or not and whether to treat them well or ill. As he puts it, "there is also the great good for those who themselves suffered as slaves that their lives were not useless, their vulnerability to suffering made possible many free choices, and thereby so many steps towards the formation of good or bad character" (p. 245). And, of course, he is committed to a similar view about Jews in the death camps who were of use because they presented their Nazi guards with opportunities for free choices about whether to abuse them or not. Such consequences of Swinburne's position are the Repugnant Conclusions. I submit that they are transparently false. No one should accept a solution to the problem of

evil that numbers the Repugnant Conclusions among its consequences.

No doubt suffering is good for those who undergo it under special conditions. Clearly, if my suffering improves my character, it is good for me, even if it does not benefit others. More controversially, if I freely accept my suffering for the sake of some good it brings to others, my being of use willingly in this way is, at least in some cases, good for me. But Swinburne makes no effort to show that all, or even most, of the suffering endured by the slaves or the Jewish victims of the Holocaust satisfied these or similar conditions. The historical record strongly supports the conclusion that this was not the case. So Swinburne has not established the Repugnant Conclusions. Moreover, the evidence supports the view that they cannot be defended in the unrestricted form in which he is committed to them.

According to Swinburne, scripture is on his side. He claims: "That service of others, humans and God, voluntary or involuntary—being of use to them—is a tremendous good for the server seems to me something very close to the heart of the New Testament" (pp. 246-247). However, I do not think any of the passages he cites should be taken to support the conclusion that being of use which involves involuntary suffering is always good for the sufferer. For Christians, I suppose, Christ's atoning death is the paradigm of being of use in a way involving suffering, but that death, we are told, was a death he freely accepted. So I believe Christians have no good reason to subscribe to Swinburne's principle that all the ways in which the suffering of *A* is beneficial for *B* are also beneficial for *A* in its full generality and without qualification.

But if this principle is given up, Swinburne's solution to the problem of animal suffering is in trouble. Consider the cases described by Peter Singer of chickens raised in misery on factory farms. Some of them suffer throughout their lives. On Swinburne's view, God may allow this suffering provided they have lives overall in which the good for them outweighs the bad for them. It is fairly clear that Swinburne thinks God will not compensate chickens in the afterlife. I take this to be the reason he contrasts "the assumption of life after death for humans" (pp. 238-239) with the issue of "whether an animal's earthly life is on the whole good" (p. 239). To be sure, the existence of the chickens is, according to Swinburne, good for them. However, he gives us no assurance that this good alone will always outweigh their suffering. He seems to think that the good of being of use is required for that purpose, for he repeatedly employs an example of animal suffering in discussions of being of use. When he first introduces the idea of the greatness of being of use, he speaks, alluding to an example due to William Rowe, of it being "a good for the fawn caught in the thicket in the forest fire that his suffering provides knowledge for the deer and other animals who see it to avoid the fire and deter their other offspring from being caught in it" (p. 103). When he explains why free will alone will not suffice for theodicy, he invokes the good of being of use and immediately goes on to refer again to the fawn, saying that "the fawn's life is of use; it is not wasted—he has enabled others to save themselves" (p. 241). And, in yet another passage in which he expands upon this point, he insists that "if the fawn caught by the fire in the thicket does not suffer, other deer will not so readily have the opportunity of intentionally avoiding fire, he will not pro-

vide knowledge for other animals of how to avoid such tragedies, other deer and humans centuries later will not be able to show compassion for his suffering, etc." (p. 217).

But the claim that being of use by suffering is good for the fawn will lack support if we abandon the general principle that all the ways in which the suffering of any human or other animal, whether voluntary or not, benefits others are also ways in which it is good for the sufferer. It seems wildly counterintuitive to suppose that my chickens benefit from their suffering. They do not freely accept it; nor does it improve their character. The view that misery is good for the chickens because it provides opportunities for factory farmers to make free choices about whether to relieve their suffering or not strikes me as being without even a shred of independent plausibility. Without some support, it must fall.

In short, I think Swinburne's solution to the problem of evil must, at the very least, be revised. If I were making revisions, I would reject the assumptions that lead to the Repugnant Conclusions and adopt the assumption that an afterlife is possible for at least some nonhuman animals. An afterlife for chickens? Well, why not? It would not need to be everlasting in order to compensate them fully.

I disagree very sharply, on moral grounds, with Swinburne's solution to the problem of evil. Yet I recommend his book to Christian philosophers. Some of them may wish to defend the views it expresses against the objections I have raised in this review. Some may be inspired by reading it to engage in what I regard as the more promising project of revising those views in the light of my objections and others they find convincing. If this project were successfully carried out, the result might be, in my opinion, a powerful addition to the arsenal of resources for Christian apologetics.